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An Investigation of Web Atmospherics in Online Luxury Branding

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An Investigation of Web Atmospherics in Online Luxury Branding

An Honors Thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in Marketing

By
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Under the mentorship of Dr. Lindsay Larson

ABSTRACT

Having an online presence for a retail store has transitioned from serving as simply a new avenue through which a profit can be made, to a tool that can be harnessed to express a brand's personality. So how do luxury brands manage to maintain a high-end, exclusive status on the highly available landscape of the internet? The intention of this research is to identify whether luxury brands are currently taking advantage of differential web atmospherics cues, in a way that significantly sets them apart from non-luxury brand websites. To do this, we measured elements including screen space, reduction of elements, logo placement, etc. Results suggest that there are several visual and textual elements which may be used to connote luxury branding online.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

With the invention of the world wide web in the 1990's, an enormous amount of change began to take place in all areas of American society. Everything from machinery and manufacturing to social media and global communications was made to be more quick, more efficient, and less expensive than was possible ever before. The advent of the internet inspired potential for every mundane task to undergo a makeover. This included, of course, the way individuals and businesses went about purchasing goods and services. When computers and the internet met the world of retail, e-commerce was born. No longer did shopping require the consumer to travel to a brick and mortar store and interact with a salesperson. An entire transaction could now be completed in its entirety without leaving the comfort of one's home.

Despite the initial hesitation of users to embrace shopping online via the internet, growth in this new sector skyrocketed. The newfound advantages of retailing through the internet included "an increased base of potential customers, wider market coverage, cost effectiveness, a diffusion of risks, flexibility, customer loyalty," and an entirely new means of communicating with consumers (Wu et al. 2013). Never before were retailers able to so fully reach their target audiences at all hours of the day or night, from any location, for anyone with an internet connection. The significance of the internet shopping channel to retailers is undeniable with an astounding 79% of Americans now shopping online; up from just 22% in 2000 (Smith and Anderson 2016). This means that more and more emphasis is being placed on how a business approaches the virtual 'sales floor,' and that the way in which their online presence is managed can have huge

implications for the success or failure of the company as a whole. Once focused on beautiful storefronts and helpful employees, retailers now must instead utilize their websites to entice potential buyers. Beyond just sales, brands also take advantage of websites as a branding tool. The internet offers an entirely new set of opportunities for brands to take advantage of widespread reachability of their audiences, and this results in a dynamic environment for marketing to take place, and a simplified method for consumers perceive the brand and decide whether or not to purchase (Simmons 2007).

Websites have come to serve as another part of a brand's omni channel strategy. Consumers do not simply go to a store to purchase goods and services anymore. The consumer may begin their research online, find the item in a physical store, and then order from a catalog, for example. A well-designed web page can serve as a major advantage to a brand in both brand personality and promotion of overall sales; ultimately, by utilizing a webpage well, the brand can create "a seamless shopping experience [leading] to satisfaction and shopper [retention]" (Shanker et al. 2011). Regardless of the channel, businesses must identify the way in which they choose to represent themselves through the use of a brand identity. Whatever the combination of shopping channels, consumers as a whole are moving toward a more fluid approach to shopping, and the web space possesses the potential to speak directly to those consumers if harnessed effectively.

Especially recently, "an increasing number of brands [are pursuing] a 'prestigious' positioning strategy reflecting consumers' increased spending on luxury products" (Rompay et al. 2012). By choosing to identify themselves as "prestigious" or

more commonly referred to as "luxury", these brands are hoping to convey a sense of exclusivity, class, and quality. While there is not currently a widely accepted definition for what exactly luxury branding is and/or what constitutes luxury beyond price point, there are some generally accepted ideas of how luxury products are set apart from other brands. Luxury brands tend to present themselves as unique, whether that be because of craftsmanship, country of origin, quality of materials, prestige of the typical consumer, performance, etc. When a brand is able to communicate any number of these attributes and convince buyers to pay a premium price for its' goods or services, generally this is considered luxury (Interbrand 2008).

In order to convey these attributes in a brick and mortar retail location, luxury retailers typically turn to a strategic appeal to the senses of the consumer. Unique lighting, music, layout, colors, and staff all play into the way a potential customer or passerby will perceive the brand. In a study by Tudor and Mihail (2008), it was found that "the environment of the retail store modifies the perception on the quality" of the goods or services for sale. Essentially, the way a brand designs their store atmospherics will have major implications in the perceptions of the brand. With the advent of the internet rocking the world of retail, how do luxury brands continue to convey their messages of exclusivity and prestige within a virtual atmosphere? The same tactics used to position the brand towards customers within physical retail store locations are no longer applicable in the online space, and brands must find new ways to attract and retain consumers on the internet platform. The appeal is obvious, with the larger base of potential consumers that is accessible through the web, retailers have the opportunity to

reach those who "are familiar with online shopping but might not be able to go to physical luxury brand stores" (Kim, Choi, & Lee 2015).

The accessibility of the brands and potential for higher volume of sales is enticing, however this same idea can be viewed as a hindrance to the luxury brand. While normal brands strive for high accessibility and rely on ease of purchase for their sales, luxury brands take quite the opposite approach. Luxury is often regarded as a synonym for something rare or uncommon, but the initial creation of the internet was an attempt to increase availability of all types of media to the masses (Kluge et al. 2013). Luxury marketers initially argued that luxury brand client bases were mainly older and less technologically savvy, and in turn would be less inclined to purchase luxury items online (Yu, Hudders, and Cauberghe 2018). This thought process proved to be incorrect, especially noting the rapid progression of the internet shopping phenomena. Kluge et al. stated in their 2013 article, "luxury brands cannot afford to miss the opportunity to make use of the fastest growing sales channel in the luxury sector" because of a simple conflict of interests (Kluge et al., 2013).

Thus, one solution to combining the internet channel and luxury branding in a way that maintains the position of a luxury brand, is for a company to understand and make use of web atmospherics. Web atmospherics can be defined as "all the information cues used to create an online store atmosphere including descriptions of products, price, terms of sale, colors, icons, music and so forth" (Kim, Choi, & Lee 2015). When looking at the ways in which brick and mortar stores attempt to present themselves, web atmospherics are essentially the online translation of those same characteristics into the

virtual space. While the physical stores can rely on an appeal to the five senses, the "e-retailer sensory shopping experience must be played out on the template of the webpage" (Rosen and Purinton, 2004). The goal when using web atmospherics is to communicate effectively with consumers, and according to (Marciniak and Bruce 2007), "a company's website is a key tool for communication." The current study is an attempt to identify which, if any, of the web atmospheric attributes analyzed definitively differentiate the luxury brand, and what the implications may be for brands competing in the luxury space.

Each element of web atmospherics chosen for analysis is tied to research in the area of web design, aesthetics or luxury retail, and all were based around the idea that each decision made by a designer contributes to the consumers' perception of the brand. One such study asserts that the layout and atmosphere can even go so far as to influence the consumer behavior once exposed to the website (#6). The intention of this research is to identify whether luxury brands are currently taking advantage of differential web atmospherics cues, in a way that significantly differs from non-luxury brand websites. The web atmospherics elements we chose to analyze for this study are background color, font color, logo placement, moving imagery, reduction of elements, price promotion, shipping offer, and screen space, as outlined below.

Color

According to research, colors can have a strong impact on the way we perceive the world around us as consumers. Our decision to study the color choices among the luxury and

non-luxury websites was largely inspired by the findings of Kobayashi in his study on colors on the interior of retail stores (1990). His research "matched combinations of black, brown, and yellow to the word luxurious; brown, black, and gray with the word sophisticated; and a combination of black, brown, and gray with the word dignified" (Kobayashi 1990). This trend toward generally dark, neutral colors lead us to wonder if these color palettes were more often present within luxury and non-luxury websites as opposed to one another and opposed to a physical retail location.

Logo Placement

The position of a brand's logo or brand name, while seemingly meaningless, can contribute to a sense of harmony on the webpage. This idea comes from a study done by Orth, Campana, and Malkewitz that asserts that the "harmony factor" is comprised of the concepts of symmetrical and balance and that the combined effect impacts the consumers' thoughts and feelings about a particular brand (Orth, Campana, & Malkewitz 2010). Essentially, the idea is that if an image is symmetric, it appeals to a consumer's perception of the brands' quality and elegance (Henderson et al., 2003). In theory, the more symmetric the webpage and, in turn, the placement of the brand logo, can have a significant impact on the perception of a brand as either luxury or non-luxury. Therefore, it is predicted that

H1: Luxury brand websites will be more likely than non-luxury brand websites to center their logos at the top of their webpage.

Minimalism and Reduction of Elements

Much of the research surrounding the design of luxury brand aesthetics points toward a minimalistic style. Minimalism "strives for simplicity of structure and form" and is widely used in luxury branding and advertisements. Between 1995 and 2000, 85% of luxury fashion advertisements utilized the minimalist perceptual style (Zarzosa & Luna-Nevarez 2011). In order to measure the minimalism utilized in the brands' websites, both textual and visual elements present on the websites were considered for study. 'Reduction of elements' is the extent to which a website has simplified the attributes on the webpage, both textual and visual. The principle reason that this method of luxury website design may work well to communicate a perception of exclusivity in an online web space is because the minimalist style directly mimics the reduction of design elements present in the physical store locations of the luxury brands (Yu, Huddors, & Cauberghe 2018).

Textual Elements

For this study the reduction of textual elements was considered as a facet of minimalism that reduces the number of individual pieces of text on the webpage. A busy webpage filled with large amounts of textual information can feel cluttered in the same way that a messy brick-and-mortar discount store might. The overabundance of information tends to communicate a low-end feeling as it conveys the opposite information as minimalism.

Visual Elements

Visual elements for consideration in this study included both the presence or absence of *moving image* or video content, as well as the physical amount of *screen space* that a website uses for its web page. The screen space measure was inspired by a similar German study done by Kluge et al. (2013). The idea of utilizing the entire screen space as opposed to having large white (or another color) of blank space on either side of the page makes the website look simpler and more cohesive, while a choppy webpage with smaller screen space can feel crowded and low-end. Moving imagery is perhaps slightly more complex in the message it tends to portray. Moving imagery, while an element that not all websites possess, might make a web page feel high-end, even technologically advanced, simply by incorporating a video or animation. This may counterintuitively seem to be the addition of an element, but by using a video or animation, the brand can communicate more than one thing in the same amount of space on screen.

H2: Luxury brand websites will have a reduced number of elements as compared to non-luxury brand websites.

Offer: Shipping or Price

Luxury branding is often associated with high prices, and low-end brands rely on rock-bottom prices to make their sales, but how do pricing or shipping promotions play in

to the landscape of web design for luxury and non-luxury brands? As could probably be expected, luxury brands tend to suffer from pricing promotions because these go against the aspect of luxury that demands a premium price point (Kapferer, Klippert, & Leproux 2013). In many cases, the concept of luxury alone implies that the price point will be high and that prices in these instances are potentially perceived as more positive for the brand (Interbrand 2008). The opposite may be true for lower end brands where a pricing or shipping promotion that will lower the overall cost for a consumer could help to drive sales.

H3: Luxury brand websites will be less likely than non-luxury brand websites to display promotions within the website header.

METHODS

This study was intended to delve into the luxury brands market and the corresponding online presence of luxury brands' websites, as well as how these aforementioned characteristics may impact consumers' perception of luxury. To complete this project, a list of luxury brands as well as a list of non-luxury brands was developed and evaluated based on many varied criteria associated with these hypotheses. Based on the results of this investigation, a connection between the visual elements on a website and the relation to the consumers' perceived level of luxury might follow in future research.

In order to decide which brands were considered luxury, and because the perception of the brands is entirely subjective within the category, the task of choosing the brands for analysis was presented as a survey to college students. A list of brand categories (clothing/accessory brands, home decor brands, jewelry/watch brands, and personal care/make up brands) was provided to two large classrooms of introduction to marketing at Georgia Southern University. The students were asked to free-respond with any brands they felt fit into these categories within the luxury market, and then again in the non-luxury market. For each category, students were asked to provide up to three examples of a luxury brand that fit the category. Additionally, students were asked to provide up to three examples of brands that were obviously not luxury brands within each category.

When all the pretest surveys had been collected, the two resulting list of brands (luxury and non-luxury) were collated and narrowed down to a reasonable number for further analysis by the investigators. To do this, we created a tally of each time a brand was listed and for which category. The brands that made the cut were brands that were listed by students most often as either luxury or non-luxury in its respective category. Each brand was only allowed to be listed one time so that there were not duplicates either across categories or across luxury/non-luxury classification. For example, if some students listed a brand as luxury, and other students were naming the same brand as non-luxury, that brand would be removed from consideration. The final list included forty brands that were broken down by category with each of the four product categories containing ten brands. Within the ten brands listed under each category, five were brands

considered by survey respondents to be luxury brands, while the remaining five brands were those considered to be non-luxury by respondents.

For each brand that made the final list of forty, observations of their websites were made are as follows: Background color, font color, logo or brand name placement, moving imagery, reduction of elements, mention of a price promotion, mention of a shipping offer, and screen space taken up by imagery.

Analysis of Background Color and Font Color

Observation of the colors of each website was relatively straightforward. The background color recorded was the most prevalent color on the homepage header without scrolling or moving around on the homepage whatsoever. Similarly, the font color recorded was the most prevalent font color even if the most prevalent font color was not the color used in the official logo of the brand.

Analysis of Logo/Brand Name Placement

To record logo and/or brand name placement, the websites were categorized into three potential logo positions: left, center and right alignment.

Analysis of Moving Imagery

The measure of moving imagery was intended to record the amount of visual movement on the web page ranging from completely static imagery to an animation or video element. To record the level of movement on the homepage, websites were

recorded with a value of 0, 1, or 2. A value of 0 corresponded to a website that included

no movement whatsoever anywhere on the homepage. A value of 1 corresponded to a

website that included some type of slideshow text or imagery somewhere on the

homepage. A value of 2 corresponded to a website that included any type of animation or

video imagery somewhere on the homepage.

Analysis of Reduction of Elements: Textual

The measure of reduction of elements was measured by counting each separate

item of text in the header of each website. Examples of elements that were counted

include any individual textual items such as category headings, search tabs, statement of

promotion, store locator, etc. that included a textual element. The purpose of this

measure was to analyze the effect of how "busy" or cluttered the webpage is and the

impact on the perception of luxury.

Analysis of Reduction of Elements: Screen Space

The measure of screen space refers to the amount of the screen that was taken up by

brand content. This was measured through the use of a clear, plastic film placed over the

screen of a 13-inch Macbook Pro. The film was split into 20 quadrants, 4 vertically and 5

horizontally. Each quadrant measured 5.5 cm by 3.5 cm. The screen space measure was

recorded by counting the number of quadrants that were filled with webpage content as

opposed to blank space.

Analysis of Price Promotion

This measure was recorded based on the presence or absence of a price-based promotion or sale within the homepage. The record showed either a 0 for no mention of price promotion, or a 1 for a mention of a price promotion.

Analysis of Shipping Offer

This measure was recorded based on the presence or absence of an offer of free shipping within the homepage. The record showed either a 0 for no mention of price promotion, or a 1 for a mention of a price promotion. The way the shipping offer is phrased was also collected.

RESULTS

Chi-square analysis was run to determine the relationship between several luxury and non-luxury website elements. Looking at all of the data as a whole, the only significant difference between the luxury and non-luxury brand website homepages was whether the main logo of the brand name was centered on the website header or not. Chi-square tests reveals the relationship between luxury brand category and logo location, such that luxury brands were significantly more likely to center their logo at the heading of the website rather than place it at the right or left side of the screen, χ^2 (1, N = 40) = 7.03, p =.008. This finding supports H1. Within the luxury brand category, a full 85% of brands centered the logo (N=17) while only 45% of non-luxury brands had their logo centered (N=9). The non-luxury brands that did utilize a centered logo were equally

distributed among three of the four product categories; home décor was the only product

category in which none of the non-luxury brands used a centered logo.

Table 1. Chi Square Analysis of Logo Location and Price Promotion

Characteristic	Luxury brands	Non-luxury brands	Chi Square tests of independence
Logo location**	Left: 3 Center: 17 Right: 0	Left: 11 Center: 9 Right: 0	$\chi2$ = 7.03, p =.008, n = 40
Presence of price* promotion	Present: 12 Absent: 8	Present: 16 Absent: 4	$\chi2$ = 1.9, p =.17, n = 40
Presence of price promotion : clothing & jewelry categories**	Present: 4 Absent: 6	Present: 10 Absent: 0	$\chi2$ = 8.57, p =.003, n = 20

* Nears signficance level
**Significant at the .05 level or lower

Another comparison that comes near significance, in partial support of H3, is

whether the website features a price promotion. It was assumed that luxury brands would

be less likely to feature a price promotion, in the quest to present a more upscale,

exclusive feel. In fact, while 80% (N = 16) of non-luxury brands featured a price

promotion, only 60% (N= 12) of luxury brands do the same, $\chi2$ (1, N = 40) = 1.9, p =.17,

a relationship which comes very close to but does not meet a level of significance. If we

narrow the focus a bit and look solely two categories: clothing/accessories and

jewelry/watches, the mention of a price promotion then becomes significantly more likely

for non-luxury brands ($\chi2$ (1, N = 20) = 8.57, p =.003), with 100% of non-luxury brands

offering a price promotion, and only 40% or luxury brands offering a price promotion.

While this reduces our comparison data to only 20 websites and thereby reduces what can

be said about the result (due to low statistical power and inflated false discovery rate), at the very least it allows us to see that the clothing/accessory and jewelry/watches categories are driving the absence price promotions towards statistical significance, when it comes to luxury brand website design. When looking at the home decor category, there is a perfect 50/50 split between those who do and do not highlight a price promotion, for both luxury and non-luxury brands. When looking at the personal care category, only 20% of non-luxury brands highlight a price promotion.

One specific promotion of interest that is specific to e-commerce is the offer of free shipping. A majority of non-luxury brands featured their free shipping offer (60%, N=12), and a majority of luxury brands also featured this offer (65%, N=13). While there was no significant difference between luxury brands and non-luxury brands in terms of whether a shipping offer was present ($\chi 2$ (1, N = 40) = .11, p =.74), if we look only at the brands that do provide a shipping offer, luxury brands were significantly more likely to use special wording to communicate the offer ($\chi 2$ (1, N = 25) = 4.4, p =.04). As an example, a non-luxury brand like The Gap offers "free shipping on all orders of $50 or more" versus a luxury brand such as Versace offers "complimentary ground shipping," and Louis Vuitton invites you to "enjoy complimentary delivery to your door."

Table 2. Chi Square Analysis of Shipping Promotions

Characteristic	Luxury brands	Non-luxury brands	Chi Square tests of independence
Shipping offer	Present: 13 Absent: 7	Present: 12 Absent: 8	$\chi 2$ = .11, p = .74, n = 40
Unique wording of shipping offer**	Present: 4 Absent: 9	Present: 0 Absent: 12	$\chi 2$ = 4.4, p = .04, n = 25

**Significant at the .05 level or lower

When looking at the issue of reduction of elements, it becomes clear that product category matters. For example, while both the clothing/accessories category as well as the jewelry/watches category show a reduction in elements among luxury brands as compared to their non-luxury counterparts, both luxury and non-luxury personal care brands retain very low mean number of textual items on their websites. Counterintuitively, when it comes to home decor, luxury brands have a much higher mean number of textual items than non-luxury brands, suggesting that in this category, luxury brand websites are incredibly cluttered. In fact, the mean number of textual items displayed within luxury home decor websites (m=25.8) is the highest of any grouping.

Table 3. Mean Number of Textual Items by Category

	Luxury brands	Non-luxury brands	Combined mean
Clothing & Accessories	12.4	17.8	15.1
Home Decor	25.8	13.4	19.6
Jewelry & Watches	10.2	15.4	12.8
Personal Care	11.0	9.2	10.1

While H2 is not directly supported by the entire set of data collected, if you were to separate out the product categories and run an independent samples t-test without the inclusion of home decor, the reduction of elements within luxury brand websites (m=11.2, SD=3.93) as compared to non-luxury brand websites (m=14.13, SD=5.59) nears the level of significance (t(28)=1.66, p=.1), providing some support to the idea that

luxury brands would intuitively decide to reduce the number of textual elements cluttering their website (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Mean textual elements (exluding home decor category)
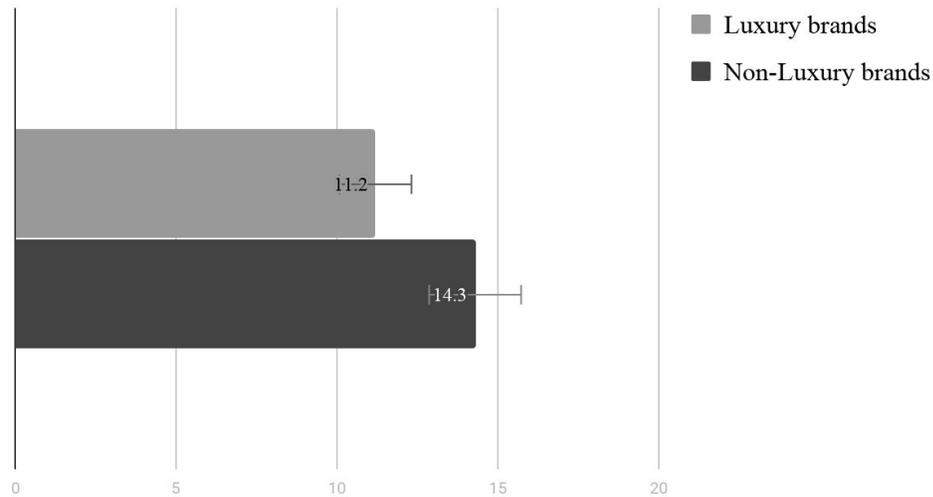
DISCUSSION

Our results suggest that the centered logo is an attribute that is significantly related to a luxury brand as opposed to a non-luxury brand website. While the data collected supports these findings, and there is research to suggest that symmetry communicates a feeling of high class or luxury, why are brands using this particular attribute to achieve the luxury feeling? There are many other attributes, depending on the market and the product category that can communicate the same feeling in a variety of ways in addition to simply centering the brand name or logo on a webpage. Brands should consider utilizing some of the various other attributes studied including moving imagery, larger screen space, reduction of elements, etc.

The group of home decor brands that we studied resulted in a theme of non-centered logos as well as no reduction of their textual elements. There are a multitude of reasons that this could be the case, but it makes them the outlier of the data. This could be an indicator that home decor brands rely on other methods of achieving a luxury feel, or potentially that in this category, brands have not strongly considered the ways in which visual elements can convey the luxury concept. The actual cause of this discrepancy is unclear, but could potentially be inspiration for future research.

When isolating the personal care category, there are no significant differences between luxury and non-luxury brand websites, such that even non-luxury brand websites utilize elements we expected of high-end brands. This may be simply that website designers are realizing what signifies luxury and are attempting to emulate that, regardless of current brand perception by consumers. In other words, because cosmetics and beauty products are within a category for which it is never smart to position as something cheap or attainable, website designers may be more keen to signaling luxury regardless of the brand's price point. For example, in this category, a full 80% of non-luxury brands avoid any mention of a price promotion, while in the categories of clothing/accessories and jewelry/watches, 100% of brands do incorporate a price promotion. In this category, 80% of non-luxury brands do not display a shipping offer, while 100% of non-luxury clothing brands and 80% of non-luxury jewelry/watch brands do display a shipping offer. Working under the assumption that both kinds of promotions water down the exclusivity appeal of the website, in the cosmetics and personal care category, it is interesting to note that even non-luxury brands are avoiding promotions.

This strategy can also be seen within the reduction of textual elements, as this category had overall the lowest mean number of elements (m=10.1) displayed within the website header, and as can be seen in Table 3, the absolute lowest number of elements were incorporated into a non-luxury personal care brand website (m=9.2)

The measure of reduction of textual elements was inspired by the web space of several elite luxury brands. The web pages viewed as exemplars in the development of this study were sparse with text and buttons, and were instead generally a large image or video filling the majority of the screen. Somehow, this layout and web design method feels higher end, nearly mimicking the stark, simple, highly designed interiors of the same high end brands' brick and mortar retail locations. But how do these brands move from a highly functional and explanatory webpage to the sleek web pages that take advantage of the idea of reduction of elements? How can streamlining of elements be accomplished without a loss of functionality? From our research, most of the leading differences in this attribute that we measured were a simple move from text to visual elements. For example, instead of a website using a tap labeled "Shopping cart" to display the shoppers' spoils, many brands are replacing the text with a small icon linking to the shopping cart. Additionally, there are some sites which entice the web user into their website using large, attractive imagery of products and models, and have extremely minimal buttons or icons that will open a drop down menu of traditional website and/or online store text elements (Product categories, help, about us, etc.).

LIMITATIONS

This research is of course not entirely conclusive given the limitations and potential for error. The limitations include a relatively small sample size and the demographic we chose to survey in order to build this sample of luxury/non-luxury brand websites. All of our respondents were college students from one professor at a single University. This introduces potential for bias and a skew to a certain viewpoint that may be shared by college students in South Georgia. With this method, our research relied entirely on the perception of the respondents as to what brands are luxury and what brands are non-luxury. Again, a potential for bias can affect the accuracy of our data to explain the perception of the population as a whole. Our website analysis focused solely on the main homepage of each website we chose to analyze rather than the entirety of each brand's website. It is possible that the data and results may have shifted if we had looked at the whole website and all pages available to the consumer.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings of this study open themselves to future strains of research on similar topics to deepen the potential impact of the results. The first continuation suggested would be to evaluate how the website attributes measured actually impact the consumers' perceptions of the brands, luxury and non-luxury. Additionally, the home decor category specifically was an outlier in many of the measures. It seems that the category as a whole has an entirely set of norms for web design and atmospherics, and the focus of future research could be to delve further into the home decor sector and determine what

attributes make a brand feel more or less luxurious. This study could also aim to

determine why the category is so far behind the other brands in terms of building a

website with minimalist design elements. On the same token, the personal care category

is in a similar situation. This category is such that it is never wise to position a brand as

cheap, so it would be interesting to evaluate the important web attributes for this category

as well.

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